THE COMMENTARIES
January 2022
Volume: 2, No: 1, pp. 1 – 11
ISSN: 2754-8791 (Print) ISSN: 2754-8805 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/com
TRANSNATIONAL PRESS LONDON

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/com.v2i1.2062

Turkish Paramilitaries during the Conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party PKK

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Executive summary

This paper focuses on how the paramilitary organisations of the Turkish state have transformed and been used over time as a 'useful' tool against dissidents, especially the Kurds. Paramilitary groups have been one of the main actors in the war between the Turkish state and the PKK, which has been ongoing for nearly forty years. These groups have sometimes been used as auxiliary forces and at other times made into death squads operating alongside the official armed forces, and they have mainly been used against Kurdish civilians who allegedly support the PKK, especially at the height of the war in unsolved murders, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings since the 1980. In this article, I argue that the Turkish state elites use this apparatus not only in domestic politics but also in conflicts in the Middle East and the Caucasus and that this paramilitary tradition of the state even extends to western Europe.

THE COMMENTARIES
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Formation of Paramilitary Organisations

For more than a century since the demise of the Ottoman Empire, armed conflicts between different Kurdish political movements and the Turkish state concerning territorial sovereignty over northern Kurdistan (southeast Turkey) and the rights of Kurds and Kurdish society (in Turkey) have continued with varying levels of intensity. The longest of these conflicts is that between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) and the Turkish state, which has been ongoing for almost 40 years. It was in August 1984 that the PKK initiated its armed struggle against the Turkish state that was to lead to a full-blown conflict through the 1990s. During this conflict, especially from the 1990s, the Turkish state has created and used various paramilitary groups in addition to its official armed units.

How should paramilitarism and paramilitary groups be defined? Roughly, state-connected paramilitary formations are informal or semi-formal armed groups with a flexible hierarchy created for specific goals (especially against civilians who support opposition movements) and that are deactivated when their missions are over. They are referred to by various names, including 'pro-government militias', 'vigilantes' and 'death squads'.[2] Such paramilitary groups have been widely used around the world, particularly from the 1980s and in internal conflicts after the Cold War.[3] These groups generally adopt a pro-state position during civil wars and may operate as part of the state's counterinsurgency strategy in asymmetric warfare, which involved the use of more mobile, smaller and irregular units instead of unwieldy military troops.[4]

There are several features that distinguish these pro-state paramilitary groups from official security forces. Key characteristics include their variety of forms, from large-scale vigilante groups to small-scale

[2] Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 6–13.
[3] Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 1, 2015): 850–76.
[4] Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5.

death squads, their unclear or lack of legal status, autonomous structure, and flexible hierarchical relations with one another and with government agencies and their pragmatic ideological and economic motivations.

After the PKK launched its armed struggle, four important paramilitary organisations emerged. The semiformal[5] Special Police Teams (*Polis Özel Harekat*) was established in 1982 and reorganised in 1985 and 1993; the semiformal and largest paramilitary organization village guards system (*Koruculuk sistemi*) was established in 1985 and reorganised in 1991; informal Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Organisation (*Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele*, JİTEM*)* was established in the late 1980s and included 'repentants' (itirafçılar, former members of the PKK). These paramilitary groups were all formed by state institutions, primarily to deal with the conflicts in northern Kurdistan. Also, during 1991–95, the extreme and illegal Islamist Hizbullah organisation that had emerged in the early 1980s in the predominantly Kurdish province of Batman was used by state institutions, particularly against pro-PKK Kurdish civilians, local leaders and politicians. These paramilitary groups are alleged to have been the perpetrators of many unsolved murders, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions.[6]

Why did the Turkish authorities establish these paramilitary organisations? There are different discussions in the literature about the reasons for the establishment of paramilitary groups, but in general, three main reasons can be highlighted, especially in the context of Turkey: the threat to the national security of the Turkish state (as perceived); the weakness of the military and its institutional capacity in guerrilla (irregular) warfare; and the plausible deniability

[5] The term semi-legal here is used to mean that paramilitary groups are established according to the law, but their recruitment, actions and hierarchical structure go beyond the legal framework. The term informal is used for illegal groups that the state has established or used but denies ties with.

[6] For more information: Ayhan Işık, "Pro-State Paramilitary Violence in Turkey since the 1990s," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, March 31, 2021, 231–49.

they afford (regarding violence carried out against civilians).[7] The state's paramilitary policy also means individuals, groups, and institutions within state structures supporting paramilitary groups by providing a shield of impunity enabling 'extrajudicial' actions. Essentially, the Turkish state employed its legal structure to facilitate the illegal actions of these semiformal and informal paramilitary groups.[8]

Legacy and Continuation

The historical background of Turkish paramilitarism can be divided into four periods: the Hamidian and Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti, CUP) periods, with Hamidiye Cavalry Regiments and the Special Organisation (*Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*) during the late Ottoman Empire (1890-1918); the early Republic era or one party rule Kemalist period, with local gangs and tribal militias, (1923–50); the multi-party period, with the Special Warfare Department (*Özel Harp Dairesi*), JİTEM, Village Guard, Special Police Team, Grey Wolves and others (1950s–2000s); and the current period of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), since 2002 with SADAT Inc. International Defense Consultancy (Uluslararası Savunma Danışmanlık İnşaat Sanayi ve Ticaret,), Gendarmerie Special Operations (Jandarma Özel Harekat, JÖH), Police Special Action (Polis Özel Harekat, PÖH), nightwatchmen (Bekçiler) Osmanen Germania, 'Esedullah' (Lion of Allah) etc.

It can be said that that there is a continuity to the paramilitary groups and their methods of violence in terms of ideologies, institutions, and individuals that span the Ottoman and Republican periods and extends today. This continuity is not simple or linear in form; yet, notwithstanding all the disjunctures and shifts, a certain linkage can

[7] Ayhan Işık, "The Emergence, Transformation and Functions of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Kurdistan (Eastern Turkey) in the 1990s" (PhD Dissertation, Utrecht, Utrecht University-Department of History and Art History- Political History, 2020).
[8] Özlem Has, "Structured Agencies of Paramilitaries in the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict: The JİTEM Case" (PhD Dissertation, Copenhagen, University of Copenhagen, 2021).

be perceived, as such organisations and methods are frequently returned to, called upon, and deployed as among the chief precautions mobilised in the face of threats to the state order. One can see the traces and continuity of the paramilitary politics employed by the state in the 1990s in the military operations that razed a dozen Kurdish cities during 2015–16.

From the 1980s: the Characteristics and Transformation of Paramilitary Groups

In Turkey, a primary reason for the Turkish state formation and usage of paramilitary groups against the PKK and its supporters from the mid-1980s was to gather intelligence. With the knowledge gained from village guards, the state elites were better able to control the rural area and conflict zones, while the special police teams and JİTEM collected information about and then targeted pro-PKK Kurdish civilians in the cities. In the early 1990s, the Turkish state changed both its military and political strategy against the PKK[9] and adopted the doctrine of low-intensity conflict (LIC). There were many reasons for this transformation, both internal and external, including increased support for the PKK, the end of the cold war and the Gulf war – and the fact that the army was losing ground and might even be defeated. Thus, between 1991 and 1996, the Turkish security forces improved their irregular warfare capacity as well by implementing the LIC doctrine and in relation to that para-militarise the conflicts.

The LIC doctrine changed the course of the war, not least by providing a framework for the reorganisation and development of paramilitary groups. It was essentially a political concept rather than a military one, however, which involved political parties in the adoption of the new strategy and, consequently, in the paramilitary forces. The state institutions were administered by a more nationalist and more radical (right-wing) political and military elite during 1991–

[9] Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*, Social, Economic, and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia, v. 102 (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2007).

96, and this political atmosphere played an important role in the reorganisation of paramilitaries. Therefore, the new war doctrine can be understood as the primary cause of the dramatic increases in the numbers of members of these formations, their development into predominantly death squads, and their relative independence as autonomous and unaccountable, with local characteristics determined by specific conditions and personnel.

This was now asymmetric warfare with a clear programme of the state elites, including 'state terror', whereby the Turkish authorities' adoption of a more complex war doctrine led to the direct targeting of Kurdish civilians, politicians and human rights advocates in an attempt to break the PKK's base of popular support and hence its grounds for legitimacy. Almost all the security and paramilitary forces were reorganised structurally and numerically within the framework of this doctrine, the ideological propaganda of Turkish nationalism was heavily used and political parties became a cornerstone of the war as the nationalist campaign made them the protectors of certain paramilitary formations. In addition to this total transformation within state institutions, some pro-state Kurdish tribes were paramilitarised through this strategy with the acceptance of the village guard system. New levels of intensive violence (disappearing persons, burning of villages, etc.) were initiated, intimidating and threatening Kurdish civilians, whether they were pro-PKK or not. Thus, with the blurring of the boundaries between the state's official military units, politicians and bureaucrats, and the paramilitary groups and unlawful killings and disappearances and destruction, the period between 1991 and 1996 may be characterised as the 'paramilitarisation of the state'.

The paramilitary forces employed had quite different characteristics. Some operated as death squads, others as auxiliary to the regular security forces; three of the four groups listed were established by state institutions and thus directly accountable (in theory), while Hizbullah was not and was consequently surreptitiously used by but technically independent of the state. Village guards and Hizbullah members were almost all peasants and radical Islamist Kurds, while

JİTEM and Special Team members were ultranationalist Turks. There was also a division of labour between different paramilitaries, which were separated both according to their geographical coverage (city vs. countryside) and their functions (death squads vs. auxiliary forces) as well as politico-religious make-up (Turkish nationalist and Islamist Kurd).

Expanding to 2015 and beyond

The state elite practice of using paramilitary groups against the Kurdish movement and society continued during the period of AKP rule beginning in 2002. In the same period, there have been many talks during the AKP ruling period, including the Oslo talks, and they have failed. Peace talks between the state and the PKK again began in 2013 ended in failure in mid-2015. After that, Turkish military forces implemented heavy attacks on youth groups of the Kurdish movement that were resisting state power in many Kurdish cities.[10] Thousands of civilians were killed in these attacks, which actively used paramilitary groups as well as the regular army and police forces, resulting in massive and intended destruction in many cities, neighbourhoods and houses. Like JİTEM and the Special Police Teams active in the 1990s, paramilitary groups were used at this time also, and with heightened capacities, openly operating under or alongside legal military units. Among the names used for the teams that participated in the 2015-16 conflicts were JÖH, PÖH and Esedullah. All of this indicates that a number of groups with experienced paramilitary members (experienced from the 1990s), with ties to the Turkish state (possibly in the Syrian civil war and Rojava), were employed for their experience in urban warfare.

In terms of accountability, the state elites appear to have operated with far more comfort in 2015–16 than in the 1990s, feeling no need to conceal or deny the violence carried out against citizens/civilians (enabled by a more authoritarian regime in Ankara, which itself was

[10] Harun Ercan, 'Is Hope More Precious than Victory? The Failed Peace Process and Urban Warfare in the Kurdish Region of Turkey', South Atlantic Quarterly 118, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 111-27.

less answerable to international norms and democratic standards). While this type of situation had occurred a few places before, like in Cizre, these were specific situations; now, there was a generalised sense of impunity across the region of northern Kurdistan (facilitated also as a spreading of extreme violence from across the border in Syria). In other words, in the 1990s, state elites could ascribe forms of violence they denied to paramilitary groups, whose existence they then further denied; the existence of informal paramilitary groups was quite important in this regard. The 2015–16 conflicts, however, represent a period when the state accepted the bare constraints of the geography of northern Kurdistan as defining the sphere of operations within which it felt no need to hide its sponsorship of paramilitary violence in the shadows.

Under AKP rule, the paramilitary groups were, in a formal sense, operating within the army and the police, and, from the images presented in a number of photos published in the press, can be said to have referred back to the 1990s for their use of names and symbols, which recalled JİTEM and the Special Police Teams. Meanwhile, the attempt that some state institutions had made in the 1990s to differentiate between the PKK and the Kurdish people (between 'terrorist' and civilian) was now implicitly recognised as having failed.

The technical capacities of the paramilitary groups appear to have greatly increased in the 2000s compared to the 1990s, and, in the authoritarian climate, their actions were not denied by state agencies like in the 1990s. Interestingly, it can be argued that paramilitary groups participating in the 2015–16 conflicts used jihadists and foreign paramilitaries just as JİTEM had used repentants in the 1990s (thus adding a new layer to the complexity of the continuing Ottoman-Republican paramilitary history). In the recent period, moreover, the paramilitaries were again legalised, as the JÖH and PÖH. As a result, the legal and hierarchical networks between official armed forces and paramilitary groups became once again and, if anything, more intertwined in the 2010s.

The main purpose of paramilitary groups in the 1990s had been to assume responsibility for severing the ties between the PKK and Kurdish society. Such, it can be said, was the division of labour between official armed groups and paramilitary groups at that time. The state violence carried out in 2015–16, however, while much shorter in duration (for various reasons), targeted everyone, making no distinction between civilians and militants. Various political and other dynamics (regime change, ultra-nationalist and Islamist coalition, absence of democracy, taking control of the legal system, and on the other hand, the success of the Kurds in Rojava and the growth of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, northern Kurdistan, etc.) were in place mitigating for this, of course, but it was certainly tied, we may assert, to the state having learnt that it was unable to draw a dividing line between the PKK and Kurdish society and no longer feeling the need to be very concerned with denial in order to act with impunity.

Exporting State-affiliated Paramilitaries

The state very quickly resorted to paramilitarism after the failure of the peace process in 2015, effectively building on its capacities developed from previous experience. There are also allegations that a company established in 2012, SADAT was behind paramilitary groups known as 'Esedullah' during the urban destruction of 2015-16. And it is further argued that Turkey has used this group (Esedullah) to train and organise mercenary and paramilitary groups operating under the direction of and in tandem with various combinations of Turkish foreign policies and military forces in recent years in Syria, in Libya, and in the disputed (Armenian/Azerbaijani) territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. While it is the case that many states make use of paramilitaries, mostly during internal conflicts, the Turkish state is also exporting them. The founder and leader of SADAT is Adnan Tanrıverdi, a retired Islamist-leaning general of the Turkish army and special warfare specialist. He is thought to have been very close to AKP co-founder Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since the 1990s, was advisor to the now President Erdoğan after the 2016 coup

attempt and served as a military advisor to him to help establish an Islamic autocratic regime in the part of Syria annexed by Turkish forces to drive out local Kurdish rule (which had emerged in the civil war there).

In addition, not only were alternative paramilitary armed groups to the military created, but also the nightwatchmen (*Bekçiler*) composed of civilians loyal to the Turkish president was founded as a paramilitary group in support of the police with a new law in 2020. There were also claims that ordinary civilians loyal to Erdoğan received armed training by SADAT and other armed groups in different parts of the country. It is estimated that there are almost 20 million armed civilians in Turkey. Beyond the official army and police armed units, the fact that there are many extreme right and Islamic coalition armed groups and civilians loyal to Erdogan and the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) in the grey zone between law and lawlessness can be considered an armed base and insurance for an autocratic regime.

Parallel to the Turkish state export of paramilitaries to Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, young paramilitary groups, armed gangs loyal to the Islamist-leaning and far-right government, such as *Osmanen Germania* and the Gray Wolves, have emerged in Europe. The rise of these extreme, pro-state Turkish vigilante groups directly and indirectly feeds the development of the far-right in Europe. These groups have committed various attacks against opposition and minority groups (Kurds, Armenians, leftists, etc.) in western European countries. Two examples are the Gray Wolves' attack on a Kurdish march in Vienna on June 26, 2020, and their daubing of 'Gray Wolves' and 'RTE' (the initials of the Turkish president) on the Armenian Genocide monument in Lyon in October 31, 2020. After the incident in France, the authorities there banned the group.

The extreme, pro-state, Turkish right not only sets itself against Turkey's dissidents who have migrated to Europe. It also takes up a position against European culture and history through various exclusionary arguments 'imperialism, crusades, communism and

other "western ills". Turkish far-right and Islamist groups have thus developed into a clandestine constituent of a foreign policy approach. Effectively, they comprise a transnational paramilitary organisation ideologically exported from Turkey and mobilised abroad as another expression of Erdoğan's authoritarianism and the regime's 'neo-Ottomanism' manifesting as an anti-Western turn.[11] In this sense, the latest developments are extending a tradition of paramilitarism into new areas out of Turkey, both metaphorically and very literally.

Conclusion

There is a long history of the formation and use of paramilitary groups against opponents of the central authority in Turkey with roots in the late Ottoman Empire. Although this has taken on different characteristics in various periods, paramilitary groups have regularly been employed as a very useful apparatus for the state elites. In the conflicts between the PKK and the Turkish state, paramilitary groups have been formed and used mainly against Kurdish civilians.

In recent years, the increase in political violence in Turkey after 2015 can be explained by the politics of paramilitarisation, now by the government composed of Islamist and ultranationalist coalition under the control of President Erdoğan. This paramilitarisation is organised both in state institutions and in society, primarily and relentlessly against Kurds, and it has also been exported abroad, both to conflict zones around and outside of Turkey and across the democracies of western Europe. Ankara has thus extended its usage of paramilitary organisations from the historical sphere of domestic politics and strategy to become a foreign policy tool. The paramilitarisation of the state in Turkey is now employed in external relations as well as at home.

[11] Alper Kaliber and Esra Kaliber, "From De-Europeanisation to Anti-Western Populism: Turkish Foreign Policy in Flux," *The International Spectator* 54, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 1–16.